

What is a theme or thesis statement?

A thesis statement is the crux of an essay. It is one or a series of sentences expressing the key points of your literary interpretation, which is the argument you will make in your essay. A thesis states relationships among topical subgroups (your key points) and establishes the significance of an essay's argument.

A thesis statement answers these questions:

- What did you learn from this literary work?
- Why should others care about this literary work?
- What argument does this literary work make?

Why does an essay need a strong thesis statement?

The thesis statement provides the reader with a roadmap of the argument. It's a promise to the reader regarding the ideas you will explore in the course of the essay. Without a strong thesis statement, an essay loses focus and its purpose becomes unclear.

Where in the essay should the thesis statement go?

The thesis statement should come somewhere in the essay's introduction. Often it comes at the end of the first paragraph, once the writer has hooked the reader and given some context for the argument. If you wait much longer to provide the reader with a thesis statement, she might begin to wonder why she should continue to read the essay. Every sentence prior to the thesis should be engaging, forceful, and compelling.

What must a thesis statement do? It should

- create an argument that builds from one point to the next, and the flow of the argument's logic should be clear; and
- limit and narrow the scope of the essay's argument, drawing the audience's focus to the elements of the literary work you wish to interpret.

In terms of the writing process, a thesis statement should

- evolve and be refined in later drafts and
- lead the writer to more precise ideas about the topic

Analysis of the significant particulars should focus and re-focus the thesis because the thesis affects the way the writer sees the significant particulars, and the significant particulars affect the way the writer understands the thesis.

What should a thesis statement NOT do? It should not

- **make a general argument that can be applied to any text.** If you can insert the title of another novel or film into your thesis and it is still true, your thesis is too general.

Example: Gogol, the protagonist in *The Namesake*, shares his story to affirm the vulnerability of and connection between all human beings.

I can easily change the novel and protagonist name in this example and the thesis statement will still be accurate. So it's far too general!

- **make a broad claim** about society, the history of mankind, people since the beginning of time, or all the people in the world. Again, these kinds of statements do not encourage close readings of significant particulars in an analytical essay and are almost impossible to prove.

Example: The protagonist in Gogol's "The Overcoat" shows how hopeless the plight of man is and how cynical society has been for generations.

Such sweeping generalizations are impossible to prove. In addition, one story and character cannot be representative of society nor more than a literary snapshot of one author's mind and one historical era, through that authorial lens. Don't make claims as if the author is a god who can see across the ages.

- **express judgments** about the characters as adages, with a moral focus only, and no literary exploration.

Example: Lady Macbeth was an evil woman whose control over her husband was reprehensible. She deserved the punishment she received.

The above thesis is more of a limited moral judgment rather than an in-depth literary examination of character. While the thesis reads clearly and strongly, it is more like an aphorism—"Don't cut off your nose to spite your face!"—than a literary interpretation. A better approach would be to examine the ways in which Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband, her motivations for doing this, and the implications these choices have in the play, all the while commenting on how these evil behaviors cause evil effects.

Example: Lady Macbeth's evil intents and actions lead to her destruction. Her manipulations of her husband, stemming from spiritual connections to dark forces and obsession with power, result in a just punishment.

Examples (note that topical subgroups are underlined)

1. Connie and Donny from “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” and “Teenage Wasteland” are both wayward, troubled teenagers who share a twisted relationship with their families. They are also both searching desperately for freedom and unique identities, though their searches are centered on dissimilar concepts.

This thesis statement for a comparison contrast essay about two short stories gives a clear map of the topical subgroups it will compare:

- characteristics which illustrate that these characters are troubles
 - elements of the difficult relationships they have with their families
 - how Connie and Donny search for a.) freedom b.) a unique identity
2. In the 2001 play *Proof*, author David Auburn incorporates a mathematical idea—parallel situations—into the structure of his play. There is distinct evidence of a parallel plot structure—a circumstance where two separate situations mirror each other perfectly. The parallel is between Catherine, the genius child of recently-dead, schizophrenic Professor Robert, and Hal, who was once Robert’s devoted pupil. During the play, Hal’s search and discovery of a mathematical proof simultaneously parallels Catherine’s desperate attempt to find evidence of her sanity. These parallel struggles force Hal and Catherine to wrestle with inner demons, conflict with each other, and transform simultaneously so they can ultimately support each other over the loss of Robert.

This thesis statement for a literary analysis of a play explicates the process of change two characters undergo and that process’ significance in the plot of the play. The topical subgroups include:

- a definition of parallel plot structure
- how and why Catherine searches for evidence of her own sanity
- how and why Hal searches for a mathematical proof
- how and why both wrestle with inner demons
- how and why they conflict with each other
- how both characters transform
- the ultimate support they share over losing Robert

3. Campbell Soup company's advertisement for Chunky Soup effectively targets the "average Joe" by establishing a masculine appeal through the presence of football star Donovan McNabb, the images of the construction site and machinery, the male narrating voice, and the simple language used in the commercial. The presence of McNabb's mother adds humor to the image of the macho man, reminding the consumer of a woman's role in purchasing food, and endorsing the product to further verify the goodness of Chunky Soup.

This thesis statement for an advertising analysis essay provides the reader with a sense of how the ideas of the paper will develop. The topical subgroups include:

- How the commercial appeals to the average Joe via masculine appeal.
- How the role of women relates to the product.
- How the previous topical subgroup reinforces Chunky Soup's nutritional value.

How do you craft a strong thesis statement?

- Examine your significant particulars you've gathered. Like weathervanes, they should all point the direction "the wind is blowing," i.e., the argument you are making.
- Examine your topic sentences (which represent topical subgroups). Ask yourself what the relationship between these topic sentences is. What argument do they form as a whole? What is its significance?
- Consider using a series of sentences like:

By looking at _____ we can see _____,
a surprising idea that is complicated by recognizing _____.

Example: By looking at the ad campaign for Diesel jeans we can see that the company targets their audience by portraying an image of rebellion, a surprising idea that is complicated by recognizing that buying Diesel jeans means conforming to a trend, however subversive and anti-consumer the ad campaign claims to be.

- **Use transitional elements in your thesis to signal relationships.** Your thesis statement should contain some transitional words that show that your argument attempts to create connections and relationships between topical subgroups. (Transitions are addressed in Lesson 20.)

Transition words are underlined in the example below.

Example: Diesel jeans ads present an image of rebellious youth culture, however the tone of the ad campaign is one of mockery and as a result the campaign suggests that being rebellious means refusing to conform, not to materialistic ideals, but to one's own ideals about rebellion. Consequently, the campaign becomes a paradox which ultimately states that youth culture doesn't believe in anything.

- **Notice the structure your thesis creates.** A thesis should not be a list of what the essay contains, but it can list the ideas you will go on to prove. Consider all the previous examples given in this handout and the roadmaps these thesis statements create for the reader.
- **Write your thesis first and last.** Building a literary argument is an intense thinking process. A thesis is not built in one day but over several days of thinking. Start early and finish late; in other words, craft a rough, ugly thesis when you set out, perhaps even erring on the side of the ineffective thesis statements this course cautions you not to write; then, make your thesis one of the last things you revise before submitting it.